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ABSTRACT

There is virtually nothing taught in the American public school that is not potentially explosive at some time or place. America's cultural makeup provides for the development of controversy whenever such issues as sex, religion, politics, and economics are raised, and particularly when they are raised in the school environment. School administrators, teachers, and boards of education can take a number of actions when confronted with challenges to academic freedom. Most useful, of course, is the formation of an adequate policy on public objections to the curriculum before the objections occur. Other actions include adopting well-advertised procedures for textbook selection; finding adequate academic justification for selection of controversial books; preparing in advance for the defense of potentially controversial new materials; providing for alternative materials or programs for children of parents who raise objections; building an adequate internal communications network to provide for rapid response to complaints; and being aware of the reactions in other communities to materials selected for use. (Author/PGD)

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Controversial Issues in Our Schools

William Goldstein

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Goldstein dedicates this fastback to:

> All my relatives in the Europe of the 1940s, who perished so needlessly in the moral outrage of the Holocaust, and to my mother, who wept endlessly for them.

Series Editor, Derek L. Burleson

Controversial Issues in Our Schools

By William Goldstein

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The Area 5D chapters sponsor this fastback as a memorial to the late Ray M. Jones. Jones had a long and distinguished career in education as a classroom teacher, principal, superintendent, and college professor. He served as president of the Bradley University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa and was the area coordinator of Area 5D from 1974 until his death on 10 July 1979. Jones exemplified the Phi Delta Kappa ideals of research, service, and leadership in his lifelong commitment to the improvement of education at all levels.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Focus on Controversy 7

The American Character 12

Mr./Ms. Chips in the Late Twentieth Century 18

Academic Theatres: The Show Must Go On 24

The Board of Education's Role in Dealing with Controversy 30

Summing Up 33

Focus on Controversy

It is as naive to assume that there is a curriculum that is "safe" from attack as it is impossible to insure oneself against all possible calamities. There is virtually nothing taught in the American public school that is not potentially explosive at some time or some place. In short, controversy is very much in the American grain; it is part of the fiber of the democratic tradition as it has developed in our country.

Recently, for example, a reputable magazine, the *Progressive*, became embroiled in a snarling controversy over whether it had the right to publish an article that bared the design for, of all things, the hydrogen bomb! As expected, the issue of freedom of the press immediately came into focus. In an editorial published in the *New York Times* (11 March 1979), the following appeared:

> That devilish question appears to lie at the heart of a suit the federal government has brought against the *Progressive*, a reputable, populist magazine. We say "devilish" because we believe that Americans must be free to publish almost anything—except perhaps something like the design for a highly dangerous secret weapon. . . .
>
> Still, we hasten to comment, because the muzzling of any American publication is and should always be a grave event. The Federal courts have long recognized that suppression before publication is the gravest possible denial of free speech and press. And only in the Espionage and Atomic Energy Acts has Congress even implied a procedure for suppressing "communication" of information that would injure the United States or help a foreign nation. . . .
>
> But under the Constitution, government bears a "heavy burden" to prove extreme and immediate danger if it seeks to silence a magazine. It is that claim by government that is on trial, not the wisdom, value, maturity, or patriotism of the article.

Now, in a world where terrorism against innocent, unarmed citizens is commonplace, where hijacking of commercial airliners is legion, and where dynamite is stashed in hidden places set to explode in crowded areas, how does one justify feeding international thugs the very information that can be used to create instruments of destruction? The intellectual and scientific communities, usually divided on a number of issues, seem fairly well unified on this one. They believe that, indeed, such illumination of "security" information would be wholly inappropriate, and prohibiting its publication would hardly abridge constitutional rights.

The issue of course in this case was the legitimate place of censorship. But censorship and its surrounding controversy is hardly restricted to national or international issues. It has returned to the public school with venomous energy. In the *New York Times* (6 May 1979, p. 26) Karen Dewitt summarizes some of the more electric cases of censorship that have returned to the schools:

> Increasingly, as a result of court victories that include a major Supreme Court decision, student journalists are printing articles on controversial issues and finding themselves under attack by angry administrators and parents. Teachers and advisers who support such efforts sometimes find themselves out of jobs; and administrators who attempt censorship sometimes find themselves in court.

Dewitt illustrates as follows:

> The staff of *The Bronco Times* at Union Grove High School in Union Grove, Wis., printed a letter to the editor in 1976 that complained about the restrooms being locked at lunch time. The headline over the letter contained a pun on a slang word that the adviser, James Engman, suggested not be used because it was in bad taste. The students decided to print the headline anyway. Mr. Engman received a letter of discipline and his teaching contract was not renewed. The school journalism class was eliminated, along with the paper. Mr. Engman is suing the school board.

Another example of controversy is cited in the *Executive Educator* (July 1979, p. 8). It involved a school system in rural Michigan where a teacher, Edward J. Stachura, showed his seventh-grade science students snapshots of his wife having a baby. The class was studying a unit on human reproduction a. the time. Shortly thereafter, at the school board

meeting, some 40 parents complained about what the teacher was doing. They said that Stachura ridiculed students who didn't want to look at the pictures and claimed he had no authority to conduct sex education in his science class. Stachura was a tenured teacher, and the school board president, acknowledging that status, indicated, "We cannot dismiss him summarily, because he has tenure. But when 40 parents show up and make these kinds of charges, we can't sit on our hands and ignore it." Stachura was suspended with pay until the situation was clarified through legal action.

What these examples illustrate is that no event or action in our classrooms is immune from stirring violent emotions and angry retaliatory responses. In short, the issue of "controversial issues" is an unrestricted landscape where just about anything can happen and usually does. Short of bland lessons in the skills of reading, arithmetic, and other so-called basics, controversy may erupt over seemingly innocuous events or materials in American classrooms in any grade at any time.

Not infrequently the climate of the times will tend to fan the flames of controversy. For example, in the current backlash of "I-told-you-so" conservatism, issues that would have gone unnoticed in the 1960s are now being raised. Things were different in that period, when the economy was ebullient and mushrooming. In the 1980s the American people seem to be increasingly disenchanted over the failure of their institutions to provide for the academic progress of their young and to prepare youth appropriately for employment. Their reaction frequently takes the form of attacks on teaching about issues that deal openly with the rupturing changes our culture is undergoing. Resistance to these changes becomes highly vocal in many communities; not infrequently it makes front-page copy.

While education issues that may divide a community are not easy to predict, one can identify forms of controversy that provide the greatest likelihood for battle. For example, if an issue involves a community's standards of taste, chances are it had better receive a second look from those responsible for running the public schools. Taste is a highly individual matter and does not lend itself either to precise definition or to control through legislation. *Ordinances concerning taste are futile, be-*

cause people will do what they will do. Failure to recognize this invites trouble.

The U.S. Supreme Court has recognized that standards of taste are largely a matter of community mores. Tampering with a community's mores or taboos is bound to create controversy. For example, it would be imprudent to deal with the issue of incest in a public school setting, even within the context of the world's great literature, because the topic is morally repugnant to many people.

To toy indiscriminately with historical tradition is another risky venture. People tend to be proud of their traditions, largely because they and their parents had a stake in the formation of them. If a community considers something to be good and feels that its perpetuation is in the interests of the greatest number, then its destruction or alteration becomes morally indigestible. For example, a student's refusal to salute the flag (notwithstanding Supreme Court decisions permitting this) shocks and dismays a large segment of our population. Refusing to sing the national anthem at school events, or even refusing to observe the symbolic gesture of standing while it is being played, caused great consternation when, during the late 1960s, such displays of contempt were frequent. One does not violate tradition lightly in communities where tradition is greatly venerated. If teachers or administrators ignore convention and disregard local traditions, then the potential for community controversy and personal attack is high.

This fastback deals with the nature of controversy in our public schools. Let us examine briefly what form these central issues take and what it is about our culture that causes such issues to be controversial.

1. Despite changing attitudes, the topic of sex (sex education notwithstanding in certain communities) has always been and continues to be potentially explosive in many communities.

2. Language and subject matter in literature texts that refer either directly or connotatively to sex, bodily elimination functions, or profanity continue to be a special target for those who would bowdlerize all literary works assigned to students.

3. Study of political or economic philosophies that are opposed by certain vocal special interest groups is immediately suspect. For example, dealing with the issue of consumerism has sometimes brought

criticism in communities populated primarily by managerial classes. The views of consumer advocate Ralph Nader sometimes produce extremely negative responses among those who see him as undermining American business and industry. Expression of liberal views by teachers sometimes results in conservative elements in a community using pressure tactics to remove such views from the curriculum (or to remove the teacher). The motivation of such groups is frequently not so much to bring a balanced treatment of an issue as it is to deny study of a political issue.

4. The propriety and legality of religion and religious practices in the public schools continue to be sources of extraordinary abrasion and frequent litigation. To practice religion in any form in the public schools (symbolic extensions included) has of course been ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court. The fact that the Court has ruled, however, in no way mitigates the controversy among groups interested in retaining prayer in the public schools. Many communities simply refuse to bend to the rulings of the courts and continue in a variety of ways to promulgate their point of view that the many problems facing the American public schools are due, at least partially, to the court-ordered removal of formal religious exercise and its symbolic extensions from those very schools. This is not an issue that is closed easily by legal edict. School officials are well-advised to understand the extraordinary sensitivity with which anything connected with the study or practice of religion needs to be treated.

Clearly, then, one can see that those who operate our schools need to be particularly wary in their treatment of sex, religion, politics, and economics—all of which are of compelling vested interest to special groups. Despite the fact that cultures, like languages, are in continuous flux, past encrustations do not dissolve easily. The verities of yesteryear, as some special groups see them, do not lend themselves especially well to negotiated settlements. In fact, so rigid are the positions of certain groups that reasonable compromise on controversial issues is all but impossible.

Let us now look at some of the elements of our national character, both past and present, that help to explain the volatility of controversial issues that may be treated in the schools.

The American Character

The United States is slightly more than two centuries old as a nation, and that is a relatively short time in man's recorded history. Within the present century the U.S. emerged as a leading economic and military power. Leadership carries the seeds of self-righteousness and arrogance. Until the Vietnamese engagement, our myth of invincibility persisted and our self-righteousness grew. Now that the myth has been exposed, we are frustrated and uncertain.

As our industrial appetite for oil increased, as our affluent lifestyle consumed ever more gasoline, and as our natural resources began to dwindle, the American citizen came to realize that his proud independence was slipping into a crippling dependence. Responses to such threats to one's well-being frequently take the form of lashing out at the nearest target. No longer able to dominate, we try to recapture the more attractive past. What better way to guard against intrusions of "alien" forces (some of which special groups hold responsible for the collapse of American global hegemony) than to try to revive a better yesteryear?

Herman Kahn, director of the Hudson Institute, a so-called think tank, has stated that analysis of national character is essential to understanding social values and political ideology. It might be useful to examine some of the elements of our national character that distinguish America from other cultures and that explain, to some extent, our responses to threatening situations and conflict.

Our culture is unique in its stubborn defense of the underdog. If we see someone who is wronged, we are righteously indignant and come to the defense of that individual or group.

The family unit, despite the charges that it is currently in a state of conspicuous decay, still permits us to impart the values of yesteryear to our children.

Notwithstanding declining attendance at formal religious services, America is still very much riveted to the triad of home, church, and school as central institutions for raising its young.

America is well-known throughout the world as a violent culture, despite the continuing stability of its government, which, unlike many others, has never experienced a coup d'etat.

The so-called Protestant ethic of hard work is no longer accepted as part of the American grain. The pleasure orientation of our young people and the disinclination to defer desirable experiences to a later day—so characteristic of a generation or two ago—seem to be evanescent in late twentieth-century America. Formerly the most achievement-oriented culture in the industrialized world, America seems to have lost the zealousness with which it once approached its economic destiny. In fact, recent measures of productivity show that America places sixth among seven major industrialized nations.

Beginning with the Vietnamese engagement, or perhaps even earlier with the Korean stalemate, Americans began to lose their "number one" self-image.

A tendency to look for handy scapegoats to blame for flaws in American culture is very much a part of our national character.

Our nation seems less and less interested in embracing "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses." As the economy weakens, characteristic American generosity appears to be inversely proportional to the unemployment rate.

Venting of grievance (through whatever means are available) is a conspicuous part of the American way. The courage of a John Peter Zenger has been multiplied many times over in recent years.

Many Americans seem to be unyielding in their pursuit of what they see as their proper causes, e.g., anti-abortion or saving the environment.

The famous General MacArthur ideals, "duty, honor, country," no longer serve as a guide for our young.

Religious orthodoxy in the culture has weakened considerably as a pervasive moral force. Conventional puritanical standards regarding sexual conduct have changed dramatically since the "radical period" of the late 1960s.

Disenchantment with and distrust of public institutions (the government in particular) saturate the American consciousness.

Despite seismic social changes, a considerable number of Americans continue to hold on to the moral values of yesterday; it is this characteristic in particular that has motivated much of the controversy in our schools today.

One could go on listing what *is* characteristically American and compare it to what *was* characteristically American. Suffice it to say at this time that American values are in a state of accelerated flux and defy precise classification.

When values are in flux, controversy is inevitable. Not surprisingly, the schools become the battleground where the controversy surfaces. Let us look at a few cases of controversy in the schools as manifestations of elements of our national character.

The *American School Board Journal* (June 1979, p. 12) reports a case in Silver Springs, Maryland, where a mother refused categorically to allow her 8-year-old son to be innoculated against measles, despite the fact that a Maryland statute required that no child be permitted to come to school without having been innoculated against the disease. The child's mother began tutoring her child at home, since a local judge had refused to allow her son to return to school until the case was heard. Such a controversy with one parent and her child challenges the very premise of statutes designed to provide the safest possible environment for the largest number of students. Clearly, in this case the public health benefits intended in this legislation did not necessarily insure compliance. The matter of religious exemption from certain governmental "requirements" has long been settled by the courts where noncompliance rests on religious tenets of a particular group; however, it is the practice of religion itself that has caused our schools to become a legal combat zone.

The issue of Christmas music in the schools comes up frequently as an example of an activity whose constitutionality may be questionable.

This issue of Christmas music is discussed in the *NASSP Curriculum Report* (June 1979, p. 3). The report states:

> Probably nowhere in the world has the issue of the proper relationship of religion and public education been more complex than in the United States. The situation continues to be characterized by confusion and anxiety about what may or may not be done or taught in the schools, and the mere mention of the question can stir up community conflicts.

Commenting on the First Amendment in our Bill of Rights where Congress is enjoined from passing any law respecting the establishment of religion, the report continues:

> This constitutionally guaranteed freedom of personal choice in religious matters to the contrary, many individuals, groups, and public institutions—including public education—have not behaved with an understanding and acceptance of the concept of cultural pluralism and of the implications of the First Amendment.

Citing the cases of *Abington School District* v. *Schempp* and *Engle* v. *Vitale* in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1962 that the practice of required Bible reading and prayer in the public schools was unconstitutional, the report notes that violations still go on. Clearly, a decision, even from the highest court in the land, cannot *insure* the dissolution of long-ingrained tradition. The report quotes Justice Tom Clark in the Abington case:

> It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization.

Also quoting Justice William Brennan in the same case:

> The holding of the court today plainly does not foreclose teaching about the Holy Scriptures or about the differences between religious sects in classes, in literature, or history.

Obviously, anyone concerned about controversial issues should understand that nothing inheres in the Constitution, according to the judgment of the Supreme Court, that prohibits teaching *about* religion or religions; what is prohibited is the *practice* of religion or its sponsorship in the public schools. In short, enlightenment about religious be-

liefs of various faiths is singularly appropriate, whereas indoctrination or proselytizing for a particular faith are blatantly unconstitutional. That such a distinction may be clear to some does not necessarily insure its clarity for others. In the state of Connecticut, for example, a statute compels each school to conduct one minute of meditation at the beginning of each school day. There are some who believe that the state legislature, wishing to reinsert prayer into the school, was cognizant of its unconstitutionality and, accordingly, enacted legislation that could conceivably withstand a constitutional test. The moment of meditation in no way *compels* prayer, but a strict constitutional interpretation might see prayer as a subliminal by-product of such meditative practice.

It is not only the religious element in our national character that injects controversy into our schools. The *Hartford Courant* (19 May 1979, p. 21) in banner headline stated: "Citizens for Decency Member Asks Schools to Remove Three Books." At East Hartford High School, the books, *Go Ask Alice*, *My Darling, My Hamburger*, and *The Pigman*, were pilloried by a member of the Connecticut Citizens for Decency, who demanded that these books be removed from the curriculum. The complainant said that the books "offer little or no value because they belittle family life, parents, and moral values." The woman indicated that she was "upset by the frank discussion of sexuality, drugs, vandalism, and alcohol—often with four-letter words." The complainant was quoted as saying, "This is the type of reading material that used to be read on the sly and if the teacher caught you at it she would have confiscated such trash without question." Adding to the complaint, the woman charged that teachers now promote such literature.

Fortunately, the school district had an appropriate set of procedures through which citizen complaints about instructional material could go in order to seek resolution.

Educators must realize that the right to speak out on an issue is deeply ingrained in the American character. The fact that some feel that nothing that leads to intellectual illumination ought to be barred from the public schools does not preclude the voicing of a diametrically opposite viewpoint. And when those two viewpoints clash, an incendiary political climate is likely to follow.

In a democracy with a free and aggressive press as its chief agent of communication, the objections of a *single* citizen or a *single* group can and do cause extraordinary consternation, bitterness, and strife in the public schools. Sometimes the controversy involves constitutional issues; sometimes issues of academic freedom; often the issues are merely tempests in teapots exacerbated by overexposure in a sensationalized press. Nonetheless, it must be clear to every educator that legitimate concerns of either a majority or minority cannot and must not be dismissed. Each controversial incident must be skillfully navigated using the administrative and judicial procedures available.

Mr./Ms. Chips in the Late Twentieth Century

America is a culture that thoroughly relishes criticizing itself. It is one of the few nations (including Great Britain and Israel) that amuses itself with self-dissection and openly and abrasively lashes out at figures in public life. Often, the American teacher or administrator becomes the victim of this ambivalent brand of amusement.

Recently in Falmouth, Massachusetts, a high school principal found himself the victim of a most unlikely set of circumstances. Fashion being what it is, the students in his school were buying a special boot that apparently had been intended for mountain climbers. Walking to school in these boots was in itself no small task, but the problem arose because the boots left almost indelible black marks on the floor, some of which were as long as eight or nine feet.

According to *Executive Educator* (June 1979, p. 8) the principal dutifully banned wearing of the boots. He felt he was perfectly within his rights, because where a garment or item worn was injurious to school property and caused undue fiscal hardship to the tax-paying community, the school may act to banish this form of apparel. Such prohibitions usually have not been regarded by the courts to be a denial of First Amendment rights to free expression as might be the case with an arbitrary adoption of a dress code based merely on the caprice of a school administrator.

Well, not only did some parents react negatively to the action of the principal, but the owner of the local shoe store that sold this footwear protested because he would be unable to sell the commodities that provided his livelihood, at least in part. There was also some speculation that the manufacturer of these boots would retaliate by suing the school system for banning its product. While the suit never materialized,

several angry letters were written to the editor of the local newspaper. But the estimated damage of some $8,000 in cleaning charges to the taxpayers and the steadfastness of the principal apparently were enough to cause the boot ban to remain in effect. The *Executive Educator* ruefully commented, "Consider the whole thing merely a footnote in the life and times of school principals."

Such an incident seems to be extraordinarily trivial, yet the controversy created was something wholly extraneous to the education of young people. It undoubtedly troubled the principal greatly and was one more time-consuming diversion from his professional responsibility for the instructional program.

The American teacher comes under a variety of scrutinies. The *American School Board Journal* (April 1979, p. 20) carried a report about a history teacher who assigned term papers, graded them, and then returned them to the students so they could peruse the teacher's reaction to their work. However, the papers were then collected and incinerated on the school premises. Reason? The teacher had, over the years, seen enough evidence of plagiarism (sometimes whole papers at a time) to justify his action. Students and parents obviously did not agree. The issue is currently in the hands of attorneys of the Montgomery County (Md.) School Board.

Another kind of controversy reported in *Education Summary* (1 June 1979) involves a teacher in Matthews County, Virginia, who assigned Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, a book written in 1932. School officials had warned the teacher that the assignment of this book could lead to his dismissal; he assigned the book anyway. His contract was not renewed. The controversy over the book involved objections to the book's sexual and religious references. The teacher, in defending his assignment of the book stated, ". . . the book is a classic. It's social commentary and it's very appropriate in this day."

The Virginia Education Association is defending the teacher and considering legal action against the school board. The fact that legal defense is provided, however, in no way eases the trauma experienced by the teacher as a result of complaints by parents about a book whose literary value is unquestionably poignant and whose social commentary sparkles.

In situations like this one, it is well for school officials and boards of education to bear in mind the distinction between teaching and indoctrination, where the intent of the teacher is to illuminate social conditions rather than to persuade politically or to impart a personal credo. Nonetheless, there continue to be extraordinary pressures emanating from conservative elements in America whose fixations on sex, politics, religion, and certain economic convictions will simply not allow these issues to be put to rest.

So widespread is the current "school watching," (perhaps even witch-hunting), that an entire network of censorship is in the process of being built by Mel and Norma Gabler of Longvue, Texas. In the *American School Board Journal* (June 1979) a series of articles appeared concerning the activities of the Gablers and their attempts to influence the kinds of textbooks that are used in our schools. While they insist they are not censors, they, nonetheless, describe themselves as "the nation's largest textbook clearinghouse." The distinction is obviously one of semantics. The activities of the Gablers and others are very much in the American mainstream, and they are accruing substantial financial support.

Clearly, attempts at censorship are increasing throughout the United States. The same issue of the *American School Board Journal* points out, in summarizing results of the study conducted by the National Council of Teachers of English, that more than 30% of schools responding to a 1977 survey reported some censorship activities compared to only 20% in 1966. The study also shows clearly that most attempts at censorship (some 78%) came from parental pressures.

Even major publications are hardly safe from those who would attempt to legislate what is read in the public schools. Familiar, reputable magazines such as *Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report,* and anything dealing with drug education or sex education become legitimate targets. Novels such as *Catcher in the Rye* (a favorite target for many years), *Of Mice and Men, The Grapes of Wrath, Go Ask Alice,* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are some of the favorite targets of censorship.

In Anaheim, California, Shakespeare's works, with the exceptions of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet,* were completely banned. All of

Dickens's work, with the exception of *Oliver Twist* (an interesting exception since the character of Fagan as portrayed in that novel is regarded by many as being virulently antisemitic), and all but one of Mark Twain's works were declared unsuitable for use in English classes.

To illustrate the kinds of controversy that can be stirred up as a result of local economic circumstances, that same issue of the *American School Board Journal* cites the banning of a textbook in civics, because in the community of Mahwah, N.J., where the major industry is a huge Ford assembly plant, the book was allegedly "anti-automobile." The book critic stated, "The book doesn't seem to be Mahwah. We're basically a middle-class, working-class, car-driving community. Without the car, where's Mahwah?"

Always in search of absolutes and eternal verities, those who would censor textbooks even include the field of mathematics. Mel Gabler states, for example, "What a student reads in a math book is that there are no absolutes; suddenly every value he has been taught is destroyed. And the next thing you know, the student turns to crime and drugs." This has to be the ultimate non sequitur.

The censor plays oracle and his pronouncements, sensational though they may be, are frequently accepted at face value. It was reported that in 1976 the Gablers were successful in stopping the purchase of five dictionaries used by school systems in Texas. Objections to these dictionaries (all of which are scholarly and reputable) were that they contained "vulgar language and unreasonable definitions," which, as the Gablers see things, violated that state's textbook code.

The preceding illustrative cases raise the issue of academic freedom, which, stated simply, is the right of a teacher to teach that which is significant and that which will enrich and illuminate the lives of his students. There are some things that administrators, board members, and teachers can do when confronted with challenges to academic freedom.

1. Be sure that selection of textbooks and reading material is executed by a well-advertised set of procedures.

2. Books that are known to be controversial should have a highly defensible academic justification before they are adopted.

3. Procedures for handling complaints should be written out and

be readily available. Such procedures should be consistent with a general policy on controversial issues adopted by the board of education.

4. The faculty should always be prepared to defend new materials that might contain subject matter considered potentially explosive or objectionable by certain segments of the community.

5. Where strong objections are voiced about children being exposed to certain materials, policies should provide for alternate materials, or parents should be given the right to withdraw their child from that segment of the instructional program that they find offensive on religious, moral, or other acceptable grounds. In short, uses of certain sensitive materials and compulsory attendance in certain kinds of instruction (e.g., sex education) should be left discretionary and be so advertised. Signatures should be required if parents do not want their children to undergo that particular phase of the instructional program.

6. Internal communication networks should be established so that there will be a minimal time lag; for example, if a teacher receives a call objecting to use of certain materials, that message should be communicated immediately to the administrator in charge of the program or unit, who, in turn, can transmit it to other appropriate school officials for decision and action.

7. It is cliché to say that the best defense is a good offense, but where material is known to have been controversial in other communities, and if a school system decides to adopt that same material, it might be well to communicate that action to the press and state what options are available to students if there are parental objections. In this way, the school signals its awareness of an incipient problem and is prepared with options should there be any protests.

There are, of course, no guarantees that, even with the best of planning, a school can prevent a controversy. Should a problem occur, then it needs to be dealt with through established complaint procedures. If a school feels that material has been chosen with the greatest of care and with the best interests of students in mind and that it can justify that such materials are the best available, then it should hold firm to the decision, even if it means litigation.

If materials were, indeed, ill-chosen, it is far better to withdraw them and begin a new selection process than to defend what would ob-

22

viously be offensive to the mores and values of a particular community.

The treatment of controversy in the classroom does not lend itself easily to pat solutions. In fact, it is probably one of the most draining experiences through which a teacher or school administrator can be put. Harold Benjamin, a distinguished educator, pointed out long ago that nothing much of any consequence will occur when the educational enterprise is run by "scared hired men." When teachers tremble, free inquiry can suddenly be torpedoed, thus undercutting the whole intent of enlightening young minds.

Academic Theatres: The Show Must Go On

As reported in *Your School and the Law* (April 1979), Chelsea, Massachusetts, made some controversial headlines concerning censorship and the law. It seems that the high school library had purchased the book, *Male and Female Under Eighteen*. In the book appeared a poem written by a 15-year-old girl that contained some explicit language that might cause even the more liberal elements of a community to raise an eyebrow.

As in most censorship cases, however, each side had its defenders. Despite the book's critics describing it with such epithets as "obscene," "filthy," "vile," and "offensive garbage," the school superintendent defended the selection of the book indicating, "I believe the book is sound and has educational value with the exception of the passage objected to and one other word in one other poem." Nonetheless, the school committee relentlessly pursued its intent to purge the questionable book, and it was removed. However, the federal court in Massachusetts ruled that such removal was illegal. It argued, "What is at stake here is the right to read and be exposed to controversial thoughts and language—a valuable right subject to First Amendment protection." Once again, the reader sees how sexual allusion and questionable language combine in tandem to strike against the conventions of a community.

In a New Hampshire censorship case reported in *Nations School Report* (11 June 1979), the Nashua school board removed *Ms.* magazine from the school library shelves. In this instance, it was not the articles in the magazine to which the school board objected, but its advertisements for vibrators, contraceptives, and game materials, which, they argued, were not suitable for high school students.

When the removal was challenged in court, the judge seemed to feel that it was not so much the sexual content of the magazine that led to its removal, but rather its political content. Accordingly, he ruled that the basis for removal of the publication was "constitutionally impermissible." The judge further exhorted the board of education to follow its own guidelines prior to removing material from a library.

It was in Enfield, Connecticut, however, where a seemingly uncontroversial program in fourth-grade social studies evoked a controversy of the first rank. Several parents objected to the use of the Data Bank Program, a program where students study "life at the top" and "life at the bottom" in Brazil. Essentially, the program probes the lives of the privileged and those who wallow in poverty in various cultures.

In the *Hartford Courant* (11 April 1979), the following was reported: "A committee of teachers and administrators voted Tuesday to recommend removal of a controversial social studies program from fourth-grade classrooms after parents complained that the program dwells on negative aspects of culture and makes their children feel guilty about world poverty." This was the first year the program had been used in Enfield, although it had been published in 1972 by Holt, Rhinehart and Winston. The paper goes on to report, "The publishers claim the Data Bank Program is being used by about 15% of all elementary schools in the country and, outside of Enfield, has never been criticized because of its material content."

Those who complained about the program indicated that "its open-ended approach to differing values and attitudes has no place in the classroom." They objected, apparently, to the program because it mentions such things as wife beating, drug abuse, and other forms of violence practiced by Amazon Indian tribes.

In its Connecticut edition, the *New York Times* (1 April 1979) reported, "The parents contend that the program has dramatized cultural differences to such a degree that anxiety and guilt, rather than an early appreciation of cultural differences, are the result." Marjorie Wilkins, one of the complaining parents, was quoted as saying, "I don't think my children can handle the guilt that comes from these sensational stories." Wilkins also stated, "Yes, I know these things exist, but isn't nine years old too young to start telling them before they

have even learned some of the basic facts about the world?"

Editorial opinion in local newspapers was almost uniformly in favor of retention of the Holt Data Bank System and, as one *Hartford Courant* editorial (30 April 1979) put it, "Let fourth-graders in that town keep their window on the world."

The faculty review committee that voted five to three to recommend removal of the program found the material "too controversial and too sophisticated for fourth-grade students." The decision of the school superintendent, Louis Mager, was to overturn the recommendation of the faculty committee and to recommend retention of the program to the board of education.

Fortunately, the Enfield Public Schools since 1971 has had a set of procedures whereby parents could register complaints and whereby materials to which they object may be examined for their appropriateness in the public schools. The first page of those procedures states that the selection of instructional materials is to be guided by the following criteria:

> To provide materials on opposing sides of controversial issues so that young citizens may develop, under guidance, the practice of critical reading and thinking.
>
> To provide materials representative of the many religious, ethnic, and cultural groups and their contributions to our American heritage.
>
> To place principle above personal opinion and reason above prejudice in the selection of materials of highest quality in order to insure a comprehensive collection.

The document goes on to state,

> It is the right and responsibility of teachers and media specialists to select instructional material which is carefully balanced to include various points of view on any controversial subject.

Above all, however, parents and their rights are clearly delineated in the following:

> In all of the above procedures, it is recognized that the individual parent has the right to request that his child not have to use any instructional material, provided the written request is made to the appropriate building principal. The child's status in the learning situation shall not be prejudiced by such parent's request for his child not to use material. No

parent, or group of parents, has the right to negate the use of reading matter for students other than their own children.

Fortunately, Enfield, having had some previous experience with attempts at censorship and removal of materials from the classroom, has had the wisdom and foresight to develop a set of procedures that are excellent guidelines for the staff, the administration, the board of education, and for the community as a whole.

The scenario in Enfield is hardly unique. The anxiety of parents, the fear of inducing unnecessary guilt into children, the deep-rooted concerns adults have about contaminating children with ideas that contradict family and local values, are not matters with which the schools can trifle. They are serious issues that deserve serious thought.

On the other hand, controversial material cannot be removed from a school simply on the basis of whim or caprice. For example, the recent TV film *Holocaust* raises the whole issue of teaching about the genocidal practices of Nazi Germany during World War II. The gassing of millions of people and the sordid incineration of their bodies in an attempt to hide evidence of such unspeakable crimes is not pleasant subject matter; yet, it is essential that children be taught what man can do to man, what a criminal government can do when left unchallenged.

The situations described in Chelsea, Massachusetts, in Enfield, Connecticut, and in many other places across this nation are fairly routine. In a vibrant, open culture different points of view will frequently result in heated controversy. In the schools, however, controversy is not limited to textbooks and instructional materials. In November 1971 the community of Trumbull, Connecticut, was confronted with a crisis of the first order.

At a lecture on witchcraft in colonial times sponsored by the Trumbull Historical Society, a minister charged that Satan was being taught at the high school in that small town. Furthermore, he accused an English teacher of conducting a so-called "black mass" as part of the course in American literature. The press immediately picked up the accusation, which was totally unsubstantiated by facts or data, and printed it. Telephones began ringing throughout the community. The minister indicated that his observations were not restricted to the com-

munity of Trumbull, but extended to New Canaan, a town to the west, and that such satanic practices were sweeping the country.

The superintendent of schools and the high school principal immediately set up a series of meetings concerning the charges and invited local clergy to attend. At no time did the minister present the school administration with either charges or with proof that such occurrences actually took place. The English teacher, who stood accused of satanistic practices, denied all charges as did the school administration. The Connecticut Education Association immediately entered the controversy on behalf of the accused teacher.

After several meetings, it was decided to request the minister to withdraw his charges publicly, since he could not substantiate them in any way, except to indicate that a couple of his parishioners had complained that such activities were going on in the classroom. The student body was almost uniformly in support of the teacher. Local editorial commentary, with minor exceptions, was steadfastly against the unfounded charges, comparing them to the very same witch trials that were the topic of discussion at the Trumbull Historical Society lecture where the minister had made the accusations in the first place. Faced with rather powerful opposition, the minister withdrew his charges publicly in a letter to the *Bridgeport Post*.

Despite the retraction of charges over this rather bizarre set of events, the accused teacher obviously suffered, and I suspect he lost some enthusiasm and desire to undertake imaginative teaching. The whole idea of his lesson had been to simulate activities of a supernatural kind in order to add realism to the world of literature. For this, the irresponsible charges of one man created a community controversy that besmirched the reputation of the teacher, consumed the time of school officials, and undermined the community's confidence in the school system.

There is no way that anyone could anticipate this kind of charge. There is no policy, no set of rules that could prevent such unbridled zealotry from inciting a community. In a free society, however, when controversy strikes, reasonable people seem to find reasonable ways out of unreasonable circumstances.

Obviously, not all attempts at excising objectionable material

come from cranks or groups on the lunatic fringe. Many of the motivations are well-intentioned, originating with honest parents trying to protect their children from those things they perceive as corrupting. While parents' motivations may be sincere and the methods of protest within the American grain, the results could be catastrophic to the spirit of free inquiry about the many sides of complicated issues. To be sure, it is the right of every parent to object to material he considers inappropriate for his youngster. Nonetheless, it should be made very clear to everyone that no parent has the right to foist his views onto the entire school populace. The public schools are just that—public and dedicated to free inquiry. It is incumbent upon those charged with the education of the young to be sure that they provide for *everyone's* rights.

The Board of Education's Role In Dealing with Controversy

School board members, if they are truly representative of the community, should be aware of community standards and sensitive to what factors will provoke outrage or retaliation of one kind or another. Just as one can sandbag river banks to keep communities from being washed away, so an alert school board and administration can protect the schools against an inundation of attacks.

The *Executive Educator* (July 1979, pp. 26-29) carries an excellent article on textbook censorship. Below is a summary from the article of certain basic elements that any good policy dealing with explosive issues ought to cover:

1. In the first place, a policy ought to indicate *who* may object or complain about the inclusion of material in the curriculum.

2. Procedures whereby such complaints may be registered should be conspicuously featured in the policy statement.

3. Appeal procedures are essential if a policy is thorough.

4. Roles of staff members should be clearly spelled out with respect to what is expected of them and the powers, or lack of them, that inhere in their role.

5. Guidelines for reconsideration of any materials that a school system may have adopted should be included in the policy statement.

6. The composition of a committee to review controversial issues should include a cross section of people—administrators, media personnel, faculty members, individuals from the community, even high school students, where appropriate.

7. Procedures whereby meetings are called and conducted should be spelled out with great clarity.

8. Any final hearing should always be conducted by the board of education in open session.

Recently, the board of education in Rocky Hill, Connecticut, adopted a policy on controversial issues that is sufficiently general to be elastic, yet is adequately specific to be enforceable. Hopefully, other school systems might find this policy of some value at least as a basic framework that can be adapted to local conditions in other systems.

Rocky Hill Public Schools
Rocky Hill, Conn.

Policy on Controversial Issues

The board of education supports, as a major cornerstone of American democratic society, freedom for teachers and students to inquire into matters affecting and influencing the current and future conduct of their lives. To insure such free inquiry, the board of education encourages intelligent, impartial pursuit of full information, alternative points of view on critical issues, and thorough examination of pertinent and appropriate materials required to conduct enlightened scholarship.

In training for effective citizenship, frequently it may become necessary for pupils to study issues which may be believed by some to be "controversial." In that light, the board of education recognizes a teacher's right and responsibility to teach and a student's right and obligation to learn, within contexts of responsible, appropriate, and well-designed curricula, those skills, attitudes, and concepts suitable for the ages and maturity of students being taught.

Further, it recognizes the need for the faculty to present material in objective, thorough, balanced ways without reluctance for expressing personal opinions, so long as those opinions are treated with full regard for all their implications, and furthermore, are rendered in order to *illuminate* rather than *indoctrinate*.

At all times, the board encourages the spirit and substance of honest inquiry in schoolrooms and learning environments under its jurisdiction. It does not shrink, nor would it have its faculty do so, from exercising its intellectual and moral obligations to deal with controversial issues, fully aware that, at times, such burdens may be of a less-than-pleasant nature; rather, it considers it the duty of faculty to bare timely issues and the obligation of students to be exposed to divergent thinking, to investigate thoroughly differing points of view, ultimately allowing reasonable and intelligent synthesis of significant aspects of all issues being examined. Extending this, the board of education recognizes, further, that it is a teacher's role to stimulate and illuminate discussion, not merely to react or remain a passive agent in serious discourse.

In any open, democratic society, there will always be disagreement, perhaps even dissent. The board of education, mindful of this, charges its administration with the preparation and dissemination of appropriate regulations, as necessary, designed to receive, respond to, and reconcile, within prescribed procedures, the legitimate concerns parents may express at times if the study of controversial issues should create rallying points for community anxiety or concern.

The board of education, further, encourages any citizen to seek of its administration or itself clarification on items of curriculum in the schools which may appear to be repugnant, unclear, or whose treatment may seem to carry with it inappropriate rendering or interpretation of the intent of this policy.

Boards of education must protect the education of the young under an umbrella policy of enlightenment and reasonableness. To cater to the demands of every marginal group frequently dignifies complaints that do not warrant such status. On the other hand, to dismiss legitimate concerns of parents or organizations or to behave arrogantly and intractably about reasonable fears parents may have about educating their young, leads only to heated confrontations, many of which end up in needless litigation.

Summing Up

In *Don Giovanni*, Mozart's compelling opera about the adventures of Don Juan, the hero's manservant, Leporello, sings his famous "catalogue song" in which he unravels a huge scroll listing Don Giovanni's sexual conquests throughout Europe, totaling 1,003. Similarly, the student of controversial issues could list and codify hundreds of cases in schools across our nation where things did not sit quite right with someone about something. When all is said and done, what is "teachable" in the public schools rests largely on a complicated lattice-work system of American values. As a nation of patchwork origins, America defies unity of point of view; it defies symmetrical configuration; it resists mightily any homogenization of outlook and social purpose.

Like it or not, for better or for worse, schools have become central battlegrounds for ideological struggles in our culture. To attempt to hide from the inevitability of controversy is tantamount to trying to repeal the law of gravity. No self-respecting educator should be intimidated by the scent of what boils in the pot of controversy, nor should he disregard its potentiality for scalding the careless. In a vibrant culture, differences in point of view need to be treated differently at different times, yet to attempt to do so helter-skelter is the surest sign that we have failed to understand ourselves.

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